

CHILL WITH ME A MINUTE, I GOT SOME STORIES TO SHARE WITH YOU: BUILDING  
COMMUNITY IN NKWEJONG AND THE STORIES WE CARRY

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **CHILL WITH ME A MINUTE, I GOT SOME STORIES TO SHARE WITH YOU: BUILDING COMMUNITY IN NKWEJONG AND THE STORIES WE CARRY**

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This thesis focuses on my navigation of academia, that is, the rhetorical choices I made as a Master's student of the Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures program at Michigan State University to build community and survive. I do this by sharing stories, reflections, and invoking the complex webs of relations that make up my realities. Actively building community and theorizing this practice along the way taught me the importance of the stories that make up a place and the labor of carrying and continuing these stories. My graduate experience was an opportunity to practice listening to people and land for the place stories practice into space (Powell 2012). Through this listening to place, I came to respect the unknowability of all the stories and I adopted an ethos that pushed me to be responsible for the ones I did know. I share these choices with future graduate students in the hopes of offering a roadmap of possibilities and in hopes of sharing in this accountability to the stories we come to know as academics in specific places.

This thesis is dedicated to mi ama, mi apa, y mi hermana.  
There is no me, my thoughts, nor my learning journey sin ustedes.  
Los quiero un chingo y espero que esta educación valió el sacrificio.

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And lastly, miigwetch to this beautiful land Nkwejong. I can't change that I've taken up space, but I hope I have worked to make it worthwhile.

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## **An Invocation**

For this thesis, I am asking you to imagine sitting with me, chillin. Sitting somewhere chatting. We could be grabbing coffee at Theios. We can be sitting under the canopies on the wood picnic tables outside El Oasis. We could be hiding in a covered porch, watching snow fall, drinking Abuelitas. Imagine me where you will, here in Nkwejong<sup>1</sup>, sharing stories with you because I have a lot to tell you.

This thesis is written with one type of person in mind: a graduate student starting a program in a new place. I am reflecting back on my experiences as a graduate student and storying this experience with the hopes of sharing the rhetorical moves and survival strategies I've come to learn in my time here. My hope in sharing this is that I can offer something to the students coming after me. I push for the theoretical and intellectual work surrounding these stories, the responsibilities telling these stories articulate, and the scholarly labor it performs. For students trying to figure out what to do with their time on a new land in a new institution, who want to organize and work in their community, I hope this thesis reads as "You TOO can do this kind of stuff."

The types of stories I tell can fall under the category of autoethnographic stories. I choose to tell autoethnographic stories and reflect, like Tabatha Roberts (2014) by interweaving my stories and "my memories and reflections...to exemplify the complex and evolutionary ways that my experiences with culture, social class, and power have impacted my positionality, development, identity negotiations, and status as a first-generation college student/graduate" (48). Beyond focusing solely on my first-generation identity, I seek to reflect on my

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<sup>1</sup> Often you will see me use the place-name Nkwejong instead of settler-colonial city names. I make this choice after having learned the Anishinaabe place-name for the land MSU rests on and in effort to honor the place where knowledge-making and storying happens. For more information on Nkwejong as a place-name, you could check out Adam Haviland's (2014) [work](#).

intersectional and constellated self as a member of a settler colonial institution seeking to build community in the area I lived in. Furthermore, as Boylorn and Orbe (2014) suggest in regards to thinking about autoethnography, I “[turn] the ethnographic gaze inward on the self (auto), while maintaining the outward gaze of ethnography, looking at the larger context wherein self experiences occur” (Denzin 227, qtd in Boylorn and Orbe 17) and use this ethnographic storytelling approach to grapple with “issues of identity and personal experience with the explicit objective to resist unidimensional treatments of complex phenomenon” (16).

Telling personal stories in my home discipline of comp/rhet is not uncommon. I turn to Collin Craig and Staci Perryman Clark (2011) when they chose to tell their own personal stories to push against the boundaries of WPA research and the ways bodies are racialized, gendered and marked through power in academic spaces and I remember that they “*used*” their “narratives to call attention to this status quo and to make visible the interlocking discourses of oppression that we continue to challenge at our institutions” (54). My storytelling is in the hopes of contextualizing my navigations of academia to say something about the systems that affect my rhetorical choices. I also remember Kendall Leon’s (2012) response to Craig and Perryman Clark’s storytelling with her own stories and calling attention to institutional restraints. As she asked scholars in the WPA field to “...show us that our histories of people working in and outside of institutions matter. Valuing “diversity” means not just reaching a quota for minority numbers, but also valuing other histories and sites for administrative education, expanding what counts as relevant scholarship...,” (1), she sought to make more space for WPAs of color. This conversation in WPA literature is an example of the ways personal stories can be used rhetorically and can rhetorically push against the expectations of academic communities. I hope my stories push against expectations too.

My approach to storying is also akin to Chicana scholar Cassie Cobos in what she defines as embodied storying. I approach storying my practices of community like Cobos (2012) through a practice of storytelling that “centers physical bodies as always present and necessary in the practices of rhetoric” and seeks “the active and continual, flesh-and-bone practicing of stories—as both tellings and theorizing—that shows the production of cultures, identities, histories, and rhetorics” (22). In my tellings, I play a central role, an almost fixed role. Interrogating my position, place and, actions, then, in this central role is a way to account for the space I take up in places I share space.

Lastly, I have come to know stories as *a practice of making meaning* or as The Cultural Rhetorics Theory Lab (Powell, et al. 2014) would argue, “if you're not practicing story, you're doing it wrong” (Act 1, Scene 1). To further complicate this, they state, “These may not be the kinds of stories you're used to hearing, or the kinds of things you're used to recognizing as story, but we hope you'll be patient with us—we think you'll know why in the end” (Act 1, Scene 1). I recognize and vibe with these sentiments. You may wonder what place my stories may have in an academic performance of thesis or how my stories can contain the rigor necessary for a thesis performance; I hope you can be patient with me, learn alongside me, and witness my labor and practice of storying as an example of the types of responsibilities I want to articulate and argue for in the scholarly labor I advocate for. Phil Bratta and Malea Powell (2016) reflect my storied approach through cultural rhetorics when they state, “the core of cultural rhetorics practices is an orientation and embodied storying of the maker in relation to what is being made” (4).

So this won't be easy. What I am also trying to get at is the physical and mental labor of coming to know a place and the responsibilities invoked knowing and working on said place. As I reflect, I look to Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014) and remember that “Telling stories isn't



easy—methodologically or emotionally” (116) and in “recognizing how stories affect my body” (116) and reflecting through telling stories, I am practicing relationality to this land, to you, my scholarship and scholarly work and the disciplines I am working in.

I will first introduce myself and the practices I carried with me to Nkwejong and this university to be able to then discuss the choices I’ve made here. I do this in hope of sharing the rhetoricity of my choices, knowing that discursive articulations in writing are already limiting my articulation of the embodied knowledge I’ve come to know in the (partial) community work I story here.

## Introductions

*Here are some stories I think of when I think of building community in Nkwejong. Please hold them through your reading of this thesis, if you can:*

I am sitting at Nuestros Cuentos in the after-school library space we convert into a “comunidad de cuentistas” (Torrez, et al. 2017). Early in our meetings, the youth are still trying to get to know us and we vet each other for knowledge about each other. One young boy asks if we speak Spanish, elated when we respond we do. He sits up on the table while telling us his grandmother spoke Spanish too and used to sing for him in his early childhood. This whole conversation is in English. He goes quiet for a moment, reflecting, and then lets us know he remembers the song. He gets real quiet, closes his eyes and sings for us.

I am standing onstage alongside my fellow organizer Angélica de Jesús. We are shook. Crying from unexpected emotions, our organizer brains turn off and we feel the moment. The first annual Queerceañera is *actually underway*. Lost in the planning, Angélica and I hadn’t taken time to savor the moment. In the process, we unexpectedly threw our own quince of sorts and came-of-age, met members of the community of all ages, and invited people into a space where we could come of age together, as queer poc community. The next year, [the local paper interviews us](#) as we organize the second and we grow in community partners. We are currently in process of planning the third annual for Spring 2018.

I am working as a mentor for a local Indigenous youth summer camp. I am a mentor for the “older” kids, 12+. As our weeklong project, we are to make elk hide and ash wood drums. Being an intertribal and mixed group of youth, some tensions become clear. In some traditions, only boys/men make drums; in others, gender plays a different role in drum making. In these moments of tension, the whole erasive violence of the colonial project seems clear *and*

inarticulable, palpable and felt when the situation seemed unsolvable. I stay quiet, listen to my elders and people who know more: singers, drum-makers, moms. Our drum-making teacher shares the tension with the youth, explains the sacredness of drums and the act of making them. He gives the youth a choice: no shame in choosing not to make one because of cultural beliefs, while also articulating the need to know why you *do* choose to make one: a responsibility. We find a tentative peace and those who wish make drums. The drum I make is a relation I have come to know in my time in Nkwejong and am responsible for.

I open with brief stories of my experiences of building community so you, the reader, have something to carry with you as I unpack the rest of the ideas storied into this thesis. If there are things that don't make 100% sense right now or seem unclear, I'd say that's okay. Carry that lack of sense and lack of clarity with you too. I will return to my practices of community building after I introduce myself and the places I have come to know.

There is one more story I want to share that I think frames this thesis well. It doesn't come from me, but from Leanne Simpson (2014):

“Shortly after the creation of the world and the birth of Nanabush, Nanabush took a trip around the world as a way of learning about the world. That's the first lesson. If you want to learn about something, you need to take your body onto the land and do it. Get a practice. If you want to learn about movement building, get yourself outside involved with people that are building movements. That doesn't mean don't read books, or don't talk to people with all kinds of intelligences. It doesn't mean don't find mentors. It does mean, get out, get involved and get invested” (17-18).

Carry this story and it's message because it's such an important framing that I too value and hope to story in this thesis. So much I will share with you regarding my practices of building community is about visiting and being out there, “tak[ing] your body onto the land and do[ing] it.” So carry the lessons of this story because I think they will help you understand what I am trying to say.

This thesis will mostly focus on my navigation of academia, that is, the choices I made as a Master's student of the Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures program at Michigan State University to build community and survive. I will do this by sharing stories, reflections, and invoking the complex webs of relations that make up my realities. Actively building community and theorizing this practice along the way taught me the importance of the stories that make up a place and the labor of carrying and continuing these stories. My graduate experience was an opportunity to practice listening to people and land for the place stories practice into space (Powell 2012). Through this listening to place, I came to respect the unknowability of all the stories and I adopted an ethos that pushed me to be responsible for the ones I did know.

## **An Origin Story**

Here's a personal origin story about how I arrived to graduate school I've told [somewhere else](#)<sup>2</sup>:

*"I am 22 and about to finish my Bachelor's degree. At this point, I've been an improv instructor for three years. I've taught people of all ages and have long considered the power dynamics and spaces of vulnerability that improv games interrogate. My university has a bi-annual in-house professional development institute called the Institute for Student Success. I inquire about applying. I am told that as a student, I do not meet the qualifications to lead a workshop because of what people expect professionally. I laugh at the irony that a conference labeled "Student Success" doesn't include student presenters. I casually mention it to a professor I am TAing for. She says we and another professor should apply. I write the proposal. We apply. We get in. The day comes and they say, "This is Eve's rodeo. We're just here to spectate and participate." We play games. I convince 20 professors and staff members to play some games, shake it out, play wooshbong, and make representations of semicolons with our bodies. (Outside, mind you, because we were asked to move for being too loud.) We end with a discussion on the application of games in different class sizes and disciplines and what to do with the decentering of authority activities like games bring to the space. I am told the workshop was well received. An administrator I meet at the social following the institute tells me I should continue on to grad school, but that I should find a funded program. She plants the seed in my head that I can get a*

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<sup>2</sup> This is a move I will practice throughout this thesis: citing other work I did during my Master's. I do this to connect these stories to other stories and to show the ways that these embodied practices directly helped me define, understand, and produce other scholarship. For me, it's all connected and I hope you will forgive the extensive block citations that are to come. They too are stories to carry.

*full ride. I get two letters of recommendation from those professors. I apply to Michigan State. I get accepted. I move to Lansing, Michigan to attend Michigan State University (MSU) as a Master's student in Writing, Rhetoric and American Cultures (WRAC)."*

I repurpose the story here to 1) model the many ways we story ourselves and 2) use the story to show something else here. I do this remembering researcher Kathleen Absolon (2011) and her notion that "I begin by locating my self because positionality, storying, and re-storying ourselves comes first" (13). I craft this introduction of myself to begin positioning who I am, where I come from, and what I came with to Nkwejong to begin my Master's program.

My full name is Everardo Junior Cuevas Jr. I am the son of Sofia Espinoza and Everardo Cuevas. I am the child of Mexican immigrants, of Raramuri ancestors and more ancestors I have to work to re-member because of colonial erasure. I identify as chicanx, queer, male-gendered, able-bodied, and working class and carry the labor of storying these complex and intersecting identities with me. I speak to you directly, reader, to try and close the space between this text, the relationship it holds to me, and you - a practice I have adopted from many of the Indigenous researchers I cite in this thesis as a way to perform relationality.

I grew up in Paramount, California on Tongva Land. The 90s in LA was filled with gangster oldies, hot summers, my huge Mexican family, and uniform-wearing, closed-campus schools. A sensitive child, I cried a lot and shied away from hypermasculinity – not understanding until later it was the toxic parts I tried my best to avoid and male privilege was to be granted whether I liked it or not. I have always been sensitive to power. Growing up around violence that I can now understand as performances of legacies of abuse, colonialism, alcoholism, and poverty made negotiations of power and the (un)balancing of resources that can occur very visible from a young age and left an impression that I have carried most of my life.

I think it's important to start here before I take you anywhere else on the map this thesis performs so you know a little bit about me and where I come from. I will continue to introduce myself and use these stories to frame how I understand part of my practice of relating to and with the university. I want to share a story to continue positioning myself: about an early exposure to service-learning in undergrad that I think frames my relationship well.

When I moved seven hundred miles North to Humboldt State University for undergrad to Wiyot, Yurok and Hupa Land my undergrad was not filled with “service” and “community engagement” in the same way, but I spent years managing curriculum and production for an improv team and teaching theater programs and camps. In undergrad, I also worked as a student assistant for a university diversity and inclusion office, which later became an admin assistant job for a retention and student success unit. In my last few months living in Arcata, I had begun working as an admin assistant in a Multicultural Center and a student support center for Native students. My “side jobs” included working at the writing center and tutoring in chemistry, math, and writing. Basically, I had a lot of hats and was everywhere working.

Of these jobs, my job at a particular elementary school had a weird backstory that began in a “Spanish for Heritage Speakers” course with a service-learning component. To fulfill this component, students were asked to contact community partners with pre-established relationships with the university and find appropriate volunteer opportunities. I contacted this school and was told that there were two Spanish classes I could volunteer in. One didn't work with my schedule and another was too early, so in a gesture to help, the school offered that I could also come to 4<sup>th</sup>-grade classes during the history section. As fourth grade California history is often state history loaded with stories about Spanish colonization and the mission system, I could come in and help with the pronunciation of words like “pueblo,” “alcalde” and “adobo.”

By all definitions, this was an appropriate use of my Spanish speaking skills to satisfy the service-learning component and so my dumbass agreed to it.

It was bad y'all. And as cringey as you would expect. I had to sit in class, introduce myself, and sit in the background until a Spanish word came out as a student was reading out loud and help pronounce it. It was about exposure. It was important these mostly white students saw a brown person.

It gets better.

At the end of the semester, I'm invited to a service-learning end-of-year celebration/presentation of sorts. The ones we practice in university admin roles to share the great things the university is doing. I am invited as a student presenter to talk about my experience in service-learning. I don't really remember the event to be honest. But I do remember sharing that the experience got me a job. And that made a lot of people happy.

And I did get a job. The volunteer coordinator liked my being there and the exposure I provided so much that she offered me a job teaching Spanish. For the next three-ish years, on-and-off I would teach after-school Spanish enrichment classes, always asking to teach something in my expertise like theater or writing. I was often told Spanish classes were needed; the exposure was important.

Homie. I'm not a Spanish teacher. My Spanish is actually kinda bad, if you wanna go there. I speak it all pocho, all mocho, by policing standards.

I was never assessed for capacity, questioned in my ability, and always reminded the class was about *exposing* them to Spanish. I wasn't even allowed to give homework or expect them to memorize the alphabet since it was an elective, after-school enrichment program. So eventually, after a few semesters in of bad worksheets/alphabet readings/watching videos in

Spanish, I finally figured to just look up games from Spanish speaking countries, find/read/share the rules of games, and play them with the students. It finally became an educational space that seemed chill and in what I could facilitate, even if it was weird and came with all this racism/problematics. It also took a while to figure it out.

These stories, I hope, begin to map out the ways I relate to universities, focusing on my relationship to “service-learning,” “outreach,” “community-engagement” university spaces. From my service-learning experience, I learned that racism, homophobia + heteronormativity, classism, and colonialism aren’t too far from good/outreach/exposure/#letsteachfortolerance kind of educational spaces. The problematics were wide and clear and layered. But it was also a job, a super valuable source of income both in rate and the story I could tell on my resume about the type of work I do and what I’m worth.

I trace these stories of my experiences through education prior to graduate school to explain some of the practices I came with and how they influenced my choices here. I think it’s important to name the rhetoricity of these choices as I attempt to articulate and point to the cultural rhetoric of my community practices. Like my practices in Nkwejong, the practices I story here build a specific type of relationship to the university. A hesitant one. A type of relationship you know is gonna be rocky, but you make it work. A relationship where you know you just gotta make it work and that comes with some performance.

## **Performance**

Here I want to introduce some theorists who I think are super useful in considering how I think about “performance” and how this idea helps explain my relationship to the university. By performance, I turn to notions of performance articulated by queer scholars and artists. From Judith Butler exploring gender as a performance, to Munoz’s notion of disidentification as a



performative practice, to la [Chica Boom's work](#) in performance art, "performance" is an important notion queer people hone into explicitly and intuitively. I am always aware that I am performing - my gender, my sexuality, my position, my pedagogy - and all of these things negotiate power. I especially turn to scholar Qwo-Li Driskill (2008) when thinking of performance and remember that performances carry rhetoric across time and space. In the case of Cherokee theater, Qwo-Li tells us that "it re-embodies the past and leads us to remember the ways that the dead - our ancestors - return to us and remain present through our *embodied* practices" (89) and that performance can be understood as a practice of "embodied historiography" (98). From this I learn that what, who and where I choose to perform invokes certain histories and focuses on certain ideologies. In the performance that is this thesis, the performances of "university" member I inhabit in my relations, and in my performances of practicing community building that I story, I am focused on the power embedded in these performative actions and what responsibilities these performances come with.

I do not use performance or performative with a connotation of something facile or superficial in this case. I mean to point to intentional, rhetorical actions/acting/performing that considers the relationships and stories it honors or dishonors when making choices about how to spend time, how to share physical and psychic energy, how to share and search for resources and who to work with. Performance here keeps in mind that sometimes I am afforded things because of performative expressions like my gender ("we need more male mentors") and sometimes I am lacking in things because of performative expressions like my racial and sexual identity ("there are no good queer poc gay bars in Lansing"). Other times, this notion of performance guides my thinking when I become the relative-person-in-charge in the ways I practice community and/or when my position as a "grad student" is why I'm being asked to be part of something, therefore

invoking a performative relationship to the university. Performance here, then, points to intentionality and carrying an awareness of the performative nature of your actions.

Performances can also be seen as intentional choices that tell certain stories. When considering the power of stories, I think to writer Maxine Hong Kingston (1989) and the concept of “reverse ancestor worship” (16) she articulates when storying her families past and her shunned aunt. The stories we tell or don’t tell can honor and/or dishonor the people who came before us, or as Kingston states, “People who can comfort the dead can also chase after them to hurt them further (16). My understanding of performance, then, takes into account this power regarding what stories we tell and don’t tell. Even if we are not actively seeking to “hurt them further,” the choice to continue to tell/perform certain stories (like colonialism) over others can also produce and continue erasure of ancestors and those who stewarded the land before us.

Alongside the power stories have to honor or dishonor, stories also visibilize histories and erase them. Qwo-Li Driskill (2016) reminds us of this power in *Asegi Stories* when discussing the ways colonizers storied the land they came to know on Turtle Island. Reflecting on De Soto’s first experience with the Cherokees he met, ze reflects on the power of De Soto’s storying, “One of the reasons the De Soto expedition and the stories is told and tells is important is that the accounts of this expedition created literal and figurative maps across the Southeast that were used by colonist afterward” (43). Because maps and stories of Indigenous people have been plagued by the framing of settlers, we must be careful when considering which literal and figurative maps we value when conceiving land and our relationship to it. DeSoto’s maps performed certain histories and understandings of the world in front of him and his settling force.

Like Driskill, I am centrally concerned with the responsibilities involved in the stories we tell and in our practices of storying, and though this, what stories I honor in my performances. As

Driskill (2016) outlines and makes the basket that is *Asegi Stories*, Qwo-Li remembers Paula Allen Gunn's notion that "The root of oppression is loss of memory" (166, quoted in Driskill). To further speak to the responsibilities coming from Gunn's truth, Driskill (2016) outlines a central responsibility this thesis is concerned with regarding the process of re-membering, storying and dreaming forward, "...we must ask critical questions about which stories get reclaimed, which stories get hidden, and which stories we hope our descendants to tell" (166). I do this re-membering and storying work through my performances with the university.

If stories are told through a series of rhetorical choices, then it is in those choices that we can find permutations of power and the ways we unsettle settled permutations that may be damaging to the place they story into space. Good performances try to be intentional and thoughtful. While not speaking about performances, per se, Kristin Arola (2017) has articulated the importance making things a certain way and what these ways of making may honor or not honor in their specificity, "Through my two days at the powwow, and in subsequent years of working with various American Indian women, I've come to understand more fully this distinction of making things the right way, of putting yourself into the objects you bring into the world so as to honor the relations that came before and will come after" (275-76). Arola helps me put an important consideration in the composing of the performance that is this thesis and the long-term performance that is my relationship to academia – being thoughtful about the making. If I am telling certain stories, it's to invoke certain histories and this self-awareness is an important facet of understanding the telling of this thesis and my relationship to academia.

For example, throughout this performance, I consistently refer to Nkwejong after learning the Anishinaabe place-name for this space where I co-inhabit. Part of the reasoning for this choice has been to invoke the Anishinaabe people whose place I want to honor and not forgot as

I am storying a place and a practice. Another reason I do this is to story myself into stories older than colonialism as to not center colonial myths. Lastly, taking note from Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013), I seek to invoke my relations and community and the home we make and have made here and remember, “when we call a place by name, it is transformed from wilderness to homeland (34).” While I will not always explain my composing practices to this detail, I am hoping you are aware of the intentionality and if some things don’t make sense to you, then assume rhetoric, and consider their meaning as is. A composition is a performance and performances, like my relationship to academia, are composed.

In these navigations and balancings of expectations and resources, of power and privilege, time and energy, I practice a relationship to academia and education that keeps trying to re-imagine and re-define a purpose for the knowledge I gain, keeping in mind the people and community around me. My time in Nkwejong has expanded my concerns to include land, invoking an interrogation of coloniality in my practice of building community and the work that I continue to story in this thesis. If I revisit my opening origin story, I see myself doing that same dance then: finagling a “beard” to get past limitations through my relations and coming across a seed I never knew existed. It is with and through this dance that I navigate graduate school, my relationship to academia and the type of resource balancing central to survival. It is with this dance that I do something with the weird identity politics that come out of being a “diverse” student recruited with an assistantship under the story that my “enrollment will enhance the educational diversity of the student body of the program into which they are admitted” (“AAGA” 1). Through performance and this dance, I actively seek to be accountable for the space I take on the land and in the communities I become a part of as I navigate academia.

My relationship I articulate to academia in these performances feels like what queer theorist Esteban Munoz (1999) describes as *disidentification*, or “the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (4). *Disidentification* helps name the *practice* that is my relating to academia: jumping between identifying and disidentifying with the university as a survival strategy. In this case, my disidentificatory practice is a dance of balancing commitments and tending to your relations, working to help co-identify, co-perform and co-maintain the places you want to be a part of. I learned to disidentify to do the work I wanted to do and it is a skill I’ve honed throughout my educational academic journey.

For a quick example, I’ve learned that sometimes when people in universities want to create support program events, often directors and professors have a whole credit card in the tens of thousands in their name dedicated to the spend and reimbursement cycle of getting things paid by state university regulations. These professors and directors are often of the same marginalized identities they are seeking to support and, without incurring this extra debt, money wouldn’t move fast enough, and events wouldn’t really happen in a timely manner. This puts already marginalized folks in specific, power-laden type of binds. Furthermore, a recent *Diverse Issues in Higher Education* article named “How Faculty of Color Hurt Their Careers Helping Universities with Diversity” laid out the ways that diversity work can hurt career prospects (House 2017). It’s just a mess. This small example shows the ways academic performances, in this case, diversity work ala Sara Ahmed (2012), can be conflated with stories that both benefit and hinder and that composing/maintaining your relationship to academia is a practice steeped in contradictions, pain, colonial history, resistance and survival.

As I've learned, to survive academia means learning to how to navigate the weight of laboring as an academic, knowing there's extra bullshit you're always going to have to put up with. My path and my stories have led me to practicing building community, through organizing and the ways I dance disidentifications with the university. This is how I work with/through struggles and realities of the webs of relations I am a part of as a person living and relating to land, community, and people because of my academic labor. I hope these stories and definitions help you understand what I came with and my orientation to academia. Now to get to what I've done here.

## **A Research Story: Chicanx in the Archives**

There's one last story that helps us transition between what I came with and what I'd begun to learn/do/be here. It's a research story. In an archive. Of all places. I want to start with a reflective snapshot I wrote in my archival processing:

Long hair. I am posing for a picture ID for the Michigan State Archives. Last picture before I shed the length from not cutting my hair my first whole year of grad school. This practice isn't new. My mother let my hair grow to my ass when I was an infant. Made a promise to La Virgen that if I survived childbirth as a premie and my first few years, she wouldn't cut my hair and offer it to her. I survived and we made the offering.

Here in this picture I am almost a whole rotation around the sun having lived on Nkwejong. I'm looking for answers in an archive, for lost cousins and Brown relations I think I can feel and hear on paved streets named honorarily for Caesar but no other markers. I am looking for proof of old buildings, proof of a community that I want to wield to make some powerful and beautiful claim about gentrification and the colonial monster. I am being formalized.

I am being disciplined into looking in archives. Making sure I fill out forms and am held accountable to the system that collects stories about Nkwejong and the city Lansing built upon it. I, in this moment, in the last day I had long hair on a 95 degree Lansing day where I learned the Great Lakes region could be so sticky, sticky, sticky, in a cardigan that Delia made fun of me for wearing, was allowed entry into knowledge, at least at this archive, at least in this picture.

I was picking up methods of being an archivist, a historian. Really, I would eventually learn to be a survivor and a forager, to see traces of ephemera where they live, to see ghosts where others can't and recognize I am part of this story too, not just a passive observer collecting information.

But not in this picture, nor in this moment. In this moment I am anxious that I had to take a picture in the first place, anxious about a system of knowledge excursions I don't know how to do, anxious about what I'll find and not find, but not how to be a good listener. Here I am being disciplined.

By the time I was at the Michigan State Archives looking for Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, I was looking for traces of the Mexican and chicanx community in Old Town. This interest started from a couple of places:

1. A City Pulse article called "[Heart of the Barrio](#)" that detailed an extensive Latinx history in North Lansing and Old Town.

2. Walking down Grand River Avenue in Old Town, I noticed the “Honorary” Cesar Chavez Avenue marker atop the street sign. Why only honorary? What was up with that?
3. The language of the local revitalization project for the area spoke of “urban pioneers” and seemed like obvious (repeating) colonial stories about gentrification.
4. I was looking for traces of community, ways to belong.

Getting to the Michigan archives was part of a directed study with Dr. Delia Fernandez. What I assumed coming into this directed study was finding proof of a community that “was there before,” so I could talk about gentrification and say something about the rhetoric of gentrification. Of course, I sort of found that but ended up finding so much more.

Through Professor Delia’s guided readings, we discussed layers to place. She had me read Monica Perales’ *Smeltertown*. I was enthralled by the thriving Mexican and Mexican-American community that stayed off official maps, that was basically self-governing, in light of being this community space patroned and destroyed by the decisions of a company, of private interests. We discussed the ways geopolitics and economics move people across time and space and the scrappy ways communities exist. We began to unpack the ways histories and migration cannot be separated easily. We started touching the idea that place was a set of relations, made clear in this claim Perales (2010) makes, “The struggle over Smeltertown lays bare the intricate web of relationships, shared traditions, cultural practices and memories that formed the basis of a working community, and the remarkable ways people derived meaning from and forged a deep connection on this place on the banks of the Rio Grande” (2). “The remarkable ways people derived meaning from and forged a deep connection to this place...” It was becoming clear here that “place” exists in social relations. How was I supposed to be able to capture all that AND



argue against the gentrifying monster? The layers of story were getting heavier and I chose to ignore them for now.

For my project, I kept trying to trace Old Town. Where was this community I could find in newspapers, in historical markers, in archives, but nothing cemented in Old Town that I could recognize beyond the honorary sign and the stories of former quinceañera shops and bakeries from my advisor who could remember this place from her childhood? Or as Lawrence Consentino (2012) puts it, where was “The heyday of El Renacimiento, Torres Taco House, Quinto Sol, Alsario’s Barber Shop, El Sombrero, Beltran Video, El Tango Café, Aldaco’s Restaurant and other spots [that] has gone the way of the beet factory, but much of Lansing’s Latino population still lives on the north side” (5)? It began to mean so much for me to say something about “THIS is where Mexicans and chicanxs live and lived.” I learned there was a beet factory in Old Town. Where was it? Can I find it on these maps?

In looking for the beet factory, I started having to carry other stories in this search. For example, The Paulo Gordillo Papers from the MSU Special Collections became a source of historical knowledge. Paulo Gordillo was the young twenty-one-year-old activist who lived in the area and at the time of the death of Cesar Chavez (who had visited Lansing many times in UFW campaigns). The reason for honorary Cesar Chavez Avenue came from many places, but a powerful story that shed light on this issue came as a story about a city election in Lansing. Gordillo worked hard to gain signatures in 1993 to convince the city council to rename Grand Avenue in Lansing to Cesar Chavez Avenue to honor the recently departed Chavez; a similar move had been made in 1988 with the naming of Martin Luther King Boulevard (that was also met with backlash, but stayed). In this special collection, I became witness to the racism in newspaper articles, the stories about racist radio hosts organizing a “win a Mexican” contest, and

the backlash from Grand River proprietors complaining a change in street name would make them have to change their business name and why don't we honor Cesar in other ways, like scholarships and stadiums? I also witnessed proof of Gordillo and others' extensive community laboring - organizing call banks, passing out flyers, collecting signatures and sending out letters for official endorsements from civic leaders and business owners. This fight for naming a street was gross and racist AND a time for community organizing. As Cosentino (2012) outlines, the end of this story ended in a reversal of the choice, "On March 14, 1994, the Lansing City Council voted to rename Grand Avenue as César Chávez Avenue. In June 1995, after some ugly backlash on op-ed pages and local talk radio, the change was reversed by city referendum" (4). Once.<sup>3</sup> I started to carry these stories and others like it, as I navigated the archives, it became difficult to ignore them.

In this process and related work, I also met so many people. I would eventually meet Paulo Gordillo through my community work. I also met Diana Rivera, the MSU librarian quoted in "Heart of the Barrio" who led me to many people who lived in the area I was trying to investigate. Delia also worked hard to connect me with who she knew could help me map out Lansing in similar ways that she mapped out Grand Rapids. I learned how to scour ephemera in archives like baptism records, police reports and quinceañera invitations for traces of community. I also learned and felt the little degrees of separation. I learned more tools to read and listen to and touch the land, community, and people I wanted to trace and in it all, I came to another conclusion: this wasn't what I wanted to do. Or it was, just in a different way.

I cannot tell you exactly when it happened, but it did. I just let go. I let go of the gentrification monster I wanted to hunt. I let go of my assumptions about what kinds of stories I was trying to find. I let go and it was so relieving to no longer feel like a character in a story

about pain (that wasn't necessarily my pain) that I wanted to "prove." Looking for traces of community didn't end like Malea Powell's ghost story in "Dreaming Charles Eastman," but I think it was a similar feeling. The totality of the stories I couldn't know did something for me and similarly I was reminded, "Just because Eastman's writings have been made into objects by a story told about them in imperial discourse doesn't mean that we can't, that I can't, tell different stories about them, with them, through them – and the fact of empire doesn't relieve me of my human obligation to their continued existence" (Powell 2008, 121). The unknowability of the stories I thought I needed reminded me that I need to come with the "appropriate gestures of respect, friendship, honor, and goodwill" (Powell 2008, 121).

I re-oriented myself to archives and the stories they contained. Re-oriented myself to the land I was trying to learn about and the people who lived here and their Stories. Terese Monberg (2016) captures an understanding I have come to know in this re-orienting process: "An understanding of how community members persist in their cultural/rhetorical work, often beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries we assume or see, redefines what it means to research, teach, and work with community members" (1). My foray into archival work taught me to be careful with the stories I carry and what I want to do with them. It taught me to avoid over-determining what I am trying to listen for and how I conceive community. It asked me to question why I felt privy to these stories in the first place; why I thought they were mine to tell and what would telling these stories in certain ways do for me or the people I was naming? It made me aware of the ways I was already trying to frame my stories and that it was time to back up. This experience taught me to be humble and humility is an important academic trait I've learned, homie-future-grad-student.

At the same time, beginning to carry the stories I'd come to know changed me. I was so worried about my outsider position as someone who didn't grow up in Lansing, but as I read Fernandes' (2013) work and Rosales' (2014) work in Saginaw, I started to witness the migration journeys from Mexico, to Tejas, up the midwest to Lansing that brought the community I wanted to prove was here. I couldn't unwitness these stories of migrations; I had to account for them. I couldn't unwitness that I also knew and carried the Anishinaabe migration story to this region with me either – and the layers and layers over time and space of the many migration stories on this land became something I had to account for. I too, then, was someone who moved across Turtle Island on similar and related migration trails and stories, albeit for a different type of labor. I could no longer call myself an outsider or an insider in the same way: these labels didn't matter anymore, being accountable did.

At the end of this summer, I no longer wanted to dig up stories that didn't feel were mine to tell or claim - I wanted to re-focus on the spaces where I was already part of the stories of the land. This experience taught me that I have to think about how we hold stories. I as a researcher; we as in my imagined scholarly community. I can't go taking stories to make claims that aren't mine to make. I am committed to undoing the ways *claiming* is no longer a part of my academic labor, but community work and the embodied rhetoric of this work is.

### **So Now What?**

This story has to go back again. This realization of the unknowability and my responsibilities to it happened right before the second year of my Master's program. This realization didn't happen overnight, but was a synthesis of many experiences coming together. Some, like the ones I storied early in the text – embodied, lived experiences that left me with impressions of my relations. That is, moments that made my web of connections clear enough in

that moment to feel *something*. What that something embodies is hard to articulate. Sometimes it makes sense as a connection to place. Sometimes it makes sense as knowledge of this place. And sometimes it articulates as something else entirely, but I know this feeling wouldn't exist without my web of relations.

Here then is another ideological moment to share with you an important concept I have come to know in Native and cultural rhetorics scholarship: relationality.

### **Relationality**

Before I open up to theorizing and naming academically, I want to share a poem I wrote in Dr. Trixie Smith's Cultural Rhetorics seminar in the middle of winter, when theorizing and naming seemed so limited to get at what I was coming to know. I hope this better performs the embodiment I am trying to get at, an embodiment located in a specific place with specific relations:

I keep breathing in air blown over Nkwejong  
Over snow that keeps melting too quickly  
In this winter season  
During a way to mark time the colonizer's named January 2017.

I keep feeling the cold in my lungs  
Like slower steps  
On slushy snow hiding ice underneath.

We travel on multiple trails of stories.  
Like intentional balancing of weight on slippery ice  
In layered clothing garnered through gifts to self and gifts received  
We come to know through multiple trails of stories.

I know winter kissed by Great Lakes and mind slowed by chilled air warmed in lungs and chilled again to be warmed in other lungs. I breathe air kissed by cold ancestors, warmed again by lungs, kissed by the North and Lake surface. I make meaning on land chilled by North's kiss, in seasons for contemplation, with us who ended up here through forces that maybe also made a university and tried to forget the land cooled by Lake kissed air that we breathe in and warm with our lungs.

Because this thesis is a reflective performance, invoking my communal, familial and scholarly relations on and with Nkwejong and as a member of the settler colonial institution Michigan State University, an understanding of relationality is crucial to the performing of this performance. Relationality here is referring to the epistemological worldview that meaning is made through relations, meaning making is relational and/or an emphasis on our relationships allows us to account for things. Shawn Wilson (2008) makes this clear when he states, “relationships do not merely shape reality, they are reality” (7) and when discussing how one sees the relationality around them, “Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we *are* the relationships that we hold and are a part of” (80, emphasis mine). This awareness of the importance of honoring the reality-making knowledge in all our relations is a constant I have to consider when storying and community building.

The cultural rhetorics metaphor of “constellating” visiblizes the way relationality plays into meaning making and knowledge building as something practiced *in relation*, “Constellative practice emphasizes the degree which knowledge is *never* built by individuals but is, instead, accumulated through collective practices within specific communities” (Bratta and Powell 2016, 3). Thinking about the way identities, meaning making, and practices that may seem as individual are constellated moments of reality, as opposed to individually willed moments of reality, changed the way I approach academic labor and practicing community. Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014) names how to practice relationality when she states, “To practice relationality is to understand one’s position in the world, one’s relationship to land, space, ideas, people, and living beings, and to understand how these relationships have been and will always be at play with each other” (112). As a scholar attempting to academically honor the relationality I learn/dream/come to know, I find myself asking: Where do I want to spend my time doing

research?; How is my research for me?; How is it for others?; What even is research, if I want to account for relations?

I drafted this thesis on wood paneled floor of the house I rent to a landlord on Nkwejong attempting to perform a thesis for a would-be audience in written text as a requirement in the attainment of my Master's degree. I often speak directly to you, imagined homie grad student, in an effort to make visible the relations and thinking about relationality that I am trying to model in this performance. Alongside this opening idea, I also point to my reflective style of writing as another relational aspect of this performance. As I articulate the things I want to recount to you, the hopes of my effort are to make visible the limitations of my performance, my relations and what place I am coming from. I want to model the reflective thinking I am performing. In the case of this performance, my thesis is constructed with the intent to perform reflective practices I am asking from my reader and, more specifically, my extended scholarly relations marked by people who identify as members of settler-colonial "higher ed" "institutions" and "universities." I move forward with reflection as a method and tool I use in this thesis performance in the hopes of promoting reflective reciprocity in my relations.

In learning about Michigan and more localized history, the work of local historian Delia Fernandez helped make this visible too. In her analysis of the identity-forming realities of smaller Michigan cities, Fernandez (2013) surmises, "Although culture is often represented through music and food, it is actually the affective connections between people that foster the environment that nurtures the reproduction of cultural practice" (99). Although Fernandez doesn't name relationality, she names the ways reproduction of cultural practices comes from "affective connections." Relationality often feels like a deceptively easy concept to grasp. In the realm of practicing community, it also feels like an almost obvious claim. If I'm am to value the

work of community building, then it is not something I come to alone or work for alone. Here, invoking relationality is naming the completely-unknowable and invaluable heart of knowledge that exists in our web of relations. As an academic, this too is humbling. (See a pattern here, homie?) Remembering and practicing relationality works as a reminder that it's not about knowing *all* the relationships or being a part of every single one, but understanding and respecting the knowledge that is there (and that some of it might not even be there for you to know and that's okay too).

My thesis' focus on the specific relationships between story, practicing community building, and scholarly accountability comes from my experiences. Estrella Torrez (2015) best summarizes this an intro to a *Nuestros Cuentos* collection when she states, "Story, place and community ground us as individuals" (2). As an academic, my work and the relations and stories I have come to know is central in what grounds me here in Nkwejong and define the work and the reasons for my work.



### What to do here?

You still with me? I'm figuring this is a lot to carry. I've given you so much to carry and haven't checked in. I'm sorry homie. If holding all these stories is exhausting, #solidarity, *I knooooow*. If I have, even partially, recreated the sense of heaviness and overwhelmedness I had to navigate before I made sense of my community work, then I've succeeded in my intent: twenty plus pages of posturing and framing before I felt I could tell you what I've done here and why. I think this is also reflective of where I think the field is in understanding the validity/value of this work. It's an anxious move. But maybe if I name it as such, you can imagine something else. Aight, so more sharing.

To navigate graduate school, I participated and became responsible in many organizations and programs. For the rest of this thesis, I will story my time and coming to MICCA and *Nuestros Cuentos*, two organizations/projects I became a part of in my time in Nkwejong. I think both commitments are important watershed moments in my scholarship and scholarly journey, as they've affected and determined a direction I have taken. Both of these storied moments reflect a learned way of being that began to value/orient my relations in (hopefully) non-extractive ways. Both stories contain the labors of making sense of the stories around you in community and coming to see that *this* was my work. Both stories also reflect how I came to better understand the voices of my colleagues and academic elders and make sense of their stories, advice, and claims.

I share these with you know to consider the moves I've made and to finally reflect on the ways I think they've defined my scholarship. If you need to, I hope you can extract justifications from these stories wherever you are. If you no longer need to justify similar choices, then great, I still hope they're useful to you in ways I can't imagine.

## Michigan Indigena/Chicanx Community Alliance

The Michigan Indigena/Chicanx Community Alliance, MICCA, is a graduate organization I dedicated much time to as a founding member and officer since my first semester. Like many things, our creation isn't some dramatic flair, but small meetings meeting a quiet need: a lack of community and moving against the isolation that can haunt graduate school. In my application to MSU's PhD program at the end of my MA, I told a story about my community work here and I think it's important to mention it now because it stories an important moment in meeting my colleagues and some of the choices I've made:

I came to the Anishinaabe land known as Nkwejong, or as some settlers named it, Lansing, with two carry-on fifty-pound bags and a backpack. I found cheap rent in a four-bedroom apartment and moved this queer Brown body 2224.3 miles away from home to an apartment where I didn't know anyone beyond a few emails and texts. No person is an island, but moving around the country for the academic-industrial complex might affect your ability to imagine anything beyond a lonely palm tree in a blue of unknown supposedly left-to-be-discovered. Luckily, I found community pretty quick.

Santos Ramos was tenacious with his emails. I know now, because we recruited Eric with the same fervor/desire the next year, that community is a practice and Tos led with the first moves: introduce yourself, listen, ask if you can be of help. I arrived in Lansing on a Monday, and by Wednesday Tos picked me up to give me a tour of the roads and buildings paved on Nkwejong. I knew I would like Tos when we passed a golf course and both groaned and then laughed about our shared recognition of land misuse. He took me to Theio's (still the best), and afterwards we met up with Victor at Dicker and Deal for a bookshelf and La Estrellita for all the things I was missing from home. We ate tacos and tortas and drank horchata on an August day accompanied by rolling clouds in the expansive blue sky unhindered by skyscraper or mountain that I would become used to in this Great Lakes region. This one Wednesday would lead to a great friendship with Tos and Victor. Through the community we practiced - eating, travelling, getting to know the land, talking about Chicanidad - my relations here would grow into so much more: being part of the establishing of the Michigan/Indigena Chicanx Community Alliance (MICCA), becoming a recurring performer in POC-centered, local open mic spaces and an obsession with orienting myself to the land I would be making meaning on for the next (scheduled) two years.

By the time I met Santos my third day in Nkwejong, he already had the idea and wondered how interested I was. It's important to recognize my story with MICCA doesn't start alone. It starts in

community, over food, taking a risk and meeting new colleagues. Tos was sweet and had reached out since April (later I would learn at Malea's suggestion) and wanted to build. It was his desire to build that made it easier to understand mine. The choice to spend time meeting folks and visiting was also something I came with: a learned behavior I'd watched my parent's practice in unfamiliar places. Even just a car ride across town, a visit to the local market, and sharing a meal are crucial organizing moments in retrospect, not to mention necessary steps in feeling like this place was survivable and there was community to be had. I will never forget the elder I met checking out my first day at the Estrellita who offered me company, a home to visit and a nice meal should I look her up in the phonebook. I was reminded of the tenacity of my community, regardless of my loneliness, and was reminded it's easier to build when you offer yourself, not just expect to take or receive community. This notion would be powerful in moving forward to help establish MICCA and continues to follow me in my academic career.

The Fall Semester of 2015 came and left quickly, but somehow in this semester we met many times in Tos and Angelica's living room and started reaching out to members. Initially, it started with a potluck of interested folks, just communing, talking, connecting. Slowly, we had a collective of people who were interested in organizing *as chicanxs* and the histories this came with. I, unfortunately, could not attend most organizing meetings in person my first semester, due to a seminar at the same time, but kept in touch through meeting minutes, talking to folks outside of meetings and other social gatherings we organized. Once we decided to become a graduate organization in an official capacity, we had to draft a constitution and begin to name ourselves. I think this language in the organization's constitution regarding our choices in naming ourselves best captures our goals in that moment:

Each word in the name "MICCA" carries significance for the purpose of the organization. "Michigan" is the land that brought the group together. It comes first in the name to

symbolize respect for the land, water, and Anishinaabe people. “Indígena” expresses ongoing commitment to Indigenous knowledges of the past, present, and future. “Chicanx” connects the organization to the legacy of Chicanismo, and it rejects both male-centered and binary frameworks of gender and gender expression (represented by the “x” at the end of the word). The slash between “Indígena” and “Chicanx” is a symbolic bridge between Chicanx people and their ethnic identities as Indigenous people of Turtle Island-the Americas. “Community” emphasizes the building of meaningful relationships with people at Michigan State University and beyond. “Alliance” signifies that the relationships the group builds will be based in reciprocity, collaboration, and mutual respect.

There is much to unpack here, but mainly, I want to focus on the work we imagined doing as chicanxs, in this place some call Michigan. As we came together, we often discussed the lack of spaces for us and the need to have spaces to share community. But as we began to actually imagine what that work might look like, we realized the importance of positioning ourselves in relation to this land and our communities. This move, to name our relations, through and “beyond” the university is reflective of a struggle born out of community/university relationships that seek to impose fake divides. Rather than hide from this divide, we name it, embrace it and work with/through it.

For our first activity, we chose to organize around a [Día de Muertos/Day of the Dead event](#). I remember talking about this idea with Tos during the day I storied earlier. Again, I had my seeds, he had his seeds and it was a matter of figuring out what we could do together and what we could invite other folks to do with us. While I was not there for the planning meetings, I supported by keeping up with minutes, helping make things remotely, and volunteering the day-of: setting up, organizing, cleaning up. Like many of our events our first year, we just wanted to *do it*: muster up enough gusto, improvised solutions, and elbow grease to get it done, just to see if it could be done. We weren’t theorizing our events too much, just wanted the spaces to commune and to develop the skills to organize events. Our goals weren’t wild, and yet, we ended

up with an annual event that attracts about 250 student, faculty and community members for the last three years.

In the Spring of that semester, as we organized for our then elusive idea of a Queerceañera, we also organized an officer's retreat per the advice of our advisor Dr. Estrella Torrez. In this meeting, we relied on former organizing experiences to help define our mission, vision and working agreements. I think this moment is super important because the choice to go on a "retreat," early in the Spring, spend some time away from the university in Detroit, and plan a trip that involved both formal organizing time and social time proved to be an important step in my relating to this place. This trip introduced me to Mexicantown, to organizing spaces in Detroit, and to other places I could meet community and have much needed Mexican food and tastes of home. It also gave me a better embodied understanding of the ways the Mexican diaspora manifests in the border town that is Detroit and how I would later see myself in this story. Lastly, simple things, like fun memories I could hold onto when graduate school got hard and the realization we had as a collective in this retreat that making time to cook together, share recipes, techniques, and time was just as important as any other type of organizing one may imagine. This retreat defined us and the story we tell after this retreat also captures us well:

MICCA is a grassroots group of organizers in (East) Lansing, Michigan. Our organization was created in the Fall of 2015 when a group of Chicanx and Latinx graduate students and community members came together to build a political, cultural, and spiritual home. We begin our work by acknowledging this land as Anishinaabewaki, the traditional homelands of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi. We aim to create supportive networks among our members and allies, facilitate opportunities for cultural education and community healing locally, and build direct action campaigns that confront and shift power.

I think if I continue to explicitly detail events, it might start sounding like a narrative I've defined about our existence and not a story we tell together as a collective at our events, meetings and public facing interfaces like our website. There is, of course, many details and

stories I am skimming over because what I am trying to share with you are the moves I made and the processes/events I chose to be a part of. Choosing to spend my time doing this work, going on retreats, volunteering for events, meeting at socials and traveling is the heart of this retelling and an important set of moves I want to share with you because I'm not sure I would have survived graduate school without these choices.

Moreto, I think, it was these moves that started helping me make sense of the scholarship I was reading and interacting with. Through my community work, I increasingly became more and more invested in the stories around me about this place I was coming to know.

So when Malea Powell (2012) tells us that "Stories take place. Stories practice place into space. Stories produce habitable spaces" (391), then it is through my work in MICCA and other organizations I've been involved with that I became curious about the place the stories I have learned take, what space we practice into place, and what place am I storying with these stories of this place I come to know. When Andrea Riley-Mukavetz (2014) tells us that "We need research practices that make visible the complexity of being the arms of the institution while working with and across cultures" (121), I know I can imagine new academic practices because of the experiences I have and the work I've been a part of to redefine mine and our relationship to the university. Lastly, when I hear fellow MICCA member Santos Ramos (2016) and his claim that "'Research' suggests that I am not an activist, but an academic who enters activist spaces in order to collect data, to bolster my career, and to improve the reputation of my institution. I cannot erase these connotations, nor do I desire to, because confronting the colonial legacy of academic research is something researchers *should* be doing. Academics need uncomfortable thoughts like this in order to keep us cognizant of our relationships to power" (1), I know these tensions make sense to me because of the work I've done and the ways I continue

to use my time in academia. It's a real tension. Am I a community organizer or an academic or can I be both? The functional answer for me is still both, but it means there's a lot of work to do to maintain ethical and reciprocal relations in this work and MICCA is just one place I was able to do this work.

I knew I would be okay the first time I woke up on Angelica and Tos' couch after a night out. Half asleep, and promises of breakfast accompanied by laughter and good coffee, I started to feel at home again. (The smell of chile helps too.) Later we would joke that living room became my unofficial room in the house, but I know the only reason I had gotten to a place where such a story became true was because of my work in MICCA and the relationships it helped me build. Investing time in graduate organizations like MICCA is not only a good survival skill or solid site of scholarship, they help define and redefine your relationship to the university and your work. It is in these spaces of community organizing that my place and work in academia actually feels clear, even if inarticulable to academic standards sometimes.

### **Nuestro Cuentos**

*Nuestros Cuentos* is a joint-partnership between the MSU Residential College of Arts and Humanities (RCAH), the Lansing School District, and other community partners. *Nuestros Cuentos* is a project led and organized by my advisor and mentor Dr. Estrella Torrez, who also taught the undergrad lecture component. Although a full description of our project has been published elsewhere (Torrez, et al 2017), *Nuestros Cuentos* was “a multi-layered, community and youth-oriented storytelling project that aims to highlight the stories and histories of Latinx and Indigenous youth in children's literature, particularly by providing a space for Latinx and Indigenous youth to write, edit, and publish a collaborative book of stories that is then distributed

into their own community” (92), and a good description of the way this project played into my navigation of academia is also storied in this article,

“Santos Ramos, Dr. Laura Gonzales, Victor Del Hierro, and Everardo Cuevas were Latinx graduate students whose participation in the project was structured as an internship for their department that included attending the undergraduate course, help plan curriculum, and facilitate activities with youth during the bi-weekly school visits. As graduate students at various stages in their careers Ramos, Gonzales, Del Hierro, and Cuevas also used this collaboration with Nuestros Cuentos as a way to research and practice community-oriented pedagogies. In addition, all authors of this article used their experience with Nuestros Cuentos to build community with other Latinxs as they worked through the challenges of navigating a Predominantly White Institution” (95).

This is 100% accurate homie. My relationship and involvement in this project is multilayered and ended offering me more than I imagined. Beyond practicing community-oriented pedagogies, working with local middle and high schoolers, and building community through sharing stories, Nuestros Cuentos, like MICCA, offered space to work out ideas, commune and build relations that helped me navigate academia.

I’d say my involvement with Nuestros Cuentos unofficially began at the annual start of the academic year department picnic. (If it hasn’t become clear, a recurring lesson here is GO TO THINGS – think back to Simpson’s story.) At this picnic, I was awkwardly introduced to my would-be mentor Estrella through an informal introduction by Malea that went something like this: Estrella, this is Eve. Eve, this is Estrella. Y’all should talk. Talk.

And so we did. Estrella, like the mentor she is, already saw things in me I couldn’t see yet the first week of the semester. I awkwardly made small talk based on what I had gleaned about her from the faculty page and she listened through my awkwardness and let me know a little more about herself. I wish I could tell you I remember more about that conversation. I don’t. It was the beginning of the semester and I was still adjusting and figuring out how to be. So much information in the first few weeks. I do remember that it was one of those professional



conversations you have at professional things and we both smiled a lot and were sussing each other out. I do remember she left an impression and said I should go talk to her more.

But I didn't. Cause sometimes you don't. I still saw Estrella as she became our advisor for MICCA and shared her organizing expertise as we organized Dia de Muertos. I still wasn't sure *what* I was doing, so I just took my coursework and the directed study unit I asked Dr. Malea Powell to oversee where I just wanted to walk around and come talk to her about what I saw. Because of this unit, I would joke to myself and justify going out to open mics and bars as "research" or just walking around aimlessly as "research." In the end, it really was, but at the time, I just felt it was important to visit.

By the end of Fall 2015, it became clear I should go talk to Estrella again and, so I sent her another awkward email at the end of November:

"Hola Estrella,  
I hope you're doing well.  
Can I please have the link to schedule an appointment with you?  
I actually have hella stuff I wanna discuss with you beyond Maori stuff. So I hope you won't mind the questions about community literacy projects."

She sent me the link and I went to see her before the semester ended. This was the meeting she planted a seed in my head about working with her for the upcoming Fall 2016 semester on *Nuestros Cuentos* and that some graduate students in my department were already planning on doing work with her. I didn't commit that meeting because I still felt cautious and told her I'd let her know after I thought about it a bit. I wish I remembered why I took so long to decide. I really don't. Estrella makes fun of me still sometimes, says I should've come sooner and closer to our initial meeting. I always retort and remind her that I wasn't *ready* and that I came when I was *ready* to accept what she was offering with my full commitment. I think this is true and also is one of those things that got lost in the mess of starting in a new place, with new people, in a new

program with new ways of being. Transitions are hard homie, but luckily I had understanding people by my side.

After the new year and before the start of Spring semester, I emailed Estrella again:

“Hola Estrella,  
Feliz año! I hope you’re doing well.  
I’m writing to you to ask about nuestros cuentos before the semester starts anew. I am totally still interested in working with you and y’all and was wondering if a meeting date had been decided upon.  
I am to take the class as a 3-unit internship or w/e it was you said would be the form the class would take.  
Let me know if this is still possible.  
All the best,  
Eve”

She replied and said she would be agreeable if this work aligned with my academic goals. To Estrella, it was important that I wasn’t being exploited for my labor as a graduate student, but actually building/being involved in something that would benefit me. We continued to discuss the dynamics through a couple more emails, asked for advice from the graduate program chair because I didn’t have a committee yet, and agreed to meet via Skype to set conditions. Once we were on the same page, the forms were filled out, and she knew a little bit more about what I wanted to offer (theater games to help facilitate writing and storytelling), we made a space for me in *Nuestros Cuentos*.

The rest is history. We met bi-weekly with youth at two different schools and hung out with them, listened to their stories and designed activities with undergrads and local community college and high school volunteers to help facilitate the story telling. We ate snacks, joked, sometimes cried, but always made community every time we came to visit. As the semester went on, Estrella’s initial framing that “Nuestros Cuentos is not just about teaching writing, it’s about building community through writing” made a lot more sense. I left my composition instructor notions at the door and practiced how to be in the moment sharing stories. By March, the youth

more or less knew the stories they wanted to tell and so the last month was a fun scramble of writing and drafting and editing and listening to the struggles of trying to tell the specific story they wanted to tell. We met our publication deadline by mid-April and held a reception the last week of April.

So what are the moves here? Similar to MICCA, visiting and communing. But also, tapping into expertise and things that are already here. Estrella had run this project a few times before; it wasn't new. In fact, many of the youth had a way better idea of how things worked than the adults in the room. Another very humbling moment (hint, hint) to practice listening to the direction of youth. Beyond this, because of the generational mentor model Estrella had designed, I was able to connect with folks up and down the K-16 continuum. These connections still prove helpful and important to my resilience and connections here as I still see the youth in other projects or around town and in these moments have to remember to be a mentor even then. I still see the undergrads and community college students I met. I still work with the high school students in another project not storied here. This is an *actual* connection and cementation to place, not a theorized one. Also, little things, like all the professional and departmental lore and stories I was able to learn from my fellow grad student colleagues in their doctorate programs as we traveled together, planned or as I was being given a ride home; I too was being mentored.

*Nuestros Cuentos* also holds a funny performative space in my story. *Nuestros Cuentos* existed as a “community engagement” course in the confines of academia. This is a perfect example of my disidentificatory approach to academia. While this thesis does not cover service-learning/community engagement scholarship at length, there are critiques of service-learning that have greatly influenced how I think about story and relationality that now make more sense

because of my time in *Nuestros Cuentos*. Again, my community work and practices of building community have helped me make sense of scholarship.

An initial critique that sticks is Leeray Costa and Karen Leong's (2012) reminder that, "As some have noted, civic engagement discourse in U.S. higher education is rooted in a neutral and universalizing language that reinscribes forms of democracy and citizenship that erase difference, conceal power, and perpetuate social injustice" (171). *Nuestros Cuentos* was not a space to erase difference; it was a place that named and honored difference through storytelling and sharing. Also important to note is the way that practicing community through service-learning and community engagement can promote an ethic of "helping" those in "need" and reify a binary of "server" and "served" (Torrez 2015). Obviously, Estrella was going to practice what she preached and we went to great lengths to make this point clear, especially to our mostly white undergrads. Lastly, the work of Terese Monberg (2008) really helped me understand how story and relations play into this, when she reminds us of an important pitfall in service-learning rhetoric, "Community members are seen as research objects to be categorized rather than as human beings who might be affected by the methods and outcomes of academic knowledge production" (98) and that "listening" for community had to come in thinking about a "longview" through and across time, not just in the moment of "service."

*Nuestros Cuentos* offered me a space to work out my relations to academia as well and figure out/better imagine what I could *do* with them. Estrella asked us to work towards something publishable out of our time with *Nuestros Cuentos*, as a performative nod to the things the university expects from us. I am grateful for the article that came out of our work, but honestly, homie, there is a connection to this place that came out of this project that was 100x

more valuable from my perspective. You can't make up relationships; you have to build them and the ethos, values, and practices of *Nuestros Cuentos* helped me do just that.

See, homie, I hope I'm making clear this isn't an either/or. I've learned, over time, that there are thoughtful ways you can do scholarship that don't involve extractive methods and ask you make claims you don't feel right making. I learned that the relationships around you *can be* the embodied rhetoric of your academic labor and that connecting first and theorizing later is fine; although, you do need to be careful, and thoughtful, and humble. I learned that taking time to engage in what might be defined as "extracurriculars" is 100x more worthwhile, than worrying about not reading enough or performing enough scholarliness. This is my scholarship; not my service – as Estrella often reminded me. These two experiences, MICCA and *Nuestros Cuentos*, alongside my coursework, other community work and my archival experience, laid out a different path for me: a path concerned with being accountable that I will try to story to conclude this thesis.

## **What You Come To Know, Moving Across Land Like That**

To begin closing up this thesis, I want to start by sharing a reflective moment I storied in the beginning of drafting this project, as I started trying to figure out what I was doing and wanted to say. This is one of those reflections/ways of thinking that I know only exists because of my commitment to community organizing and the work I've engaged in building community. I think this is a good way to begin wrapping up, as this reflection contains and reiterates many of the notions of relationality and community building I have been sharing this whole time, while also looking forward:

My parents gift me my bike after my Master's commencement ceremony. Their kind of way of accepting I have chosen to stay in Nkwejong longer and have accepted the path of a PhD degree. This is a celebratory time. My friends and family gather to witness the performative commencement ceremony where I am anointed by the power of the state of michigan channeled through the school president.

I was gifted a bicycle and a television actually, both offerings a type of cementation to a place. Prior to deciding to stay longer for a PhD, my material life and the things I had that "cemented" me here were pretty simple: a mattress on the floor, a bookshelf, a laundry hamper and a yoga mat were the only furniture I owned. Add in necessary cooking utensils, some towels, clothes and the suitcases to travel between here, Los Angeles and conference locations and that's pretty much all I owned materially. The material investments I made are reflective of my working class background and the way I temporarily imagined myself here initially. When I first arrived, I expected to leave after two school years: most things I wouldn't be able to take back with me.

I also hope you reject the classist view that because I had less material things that "cemented" me here, I was in some way less committed to my relations and/or work here. On the contrary, in some ways, my material limitations greatly affected how and why I made the relationships I have: getting rides from homies, learning the public transit system, sleeping over on couches, grocery shopping with friends, carpooling, sharing furniture with roommates, taking Lyft and Uber. Investing less money in material furniture allowed me to spend some more money in other ways: offering gas money, going on outings, traveling, and visiting. This is the type of money balancing that is also reflective of my working class background and the type of managing of resources, time, and material things that is part of my understanding of relationality and the labor involved in building relationships.

So as I bike the streets paved on Nkwejong, in the days between the Spring equinox and the Summer solstice, I have become accustomed to expect warmer days, but never forget

it could still snow, rain, or wind like in the winter. Today is a nice day though. The Spring semester is over and thousands of students have left the East Lansing and the Greater Lansing area. You can feel the land breathe, the place slow down.

With this newly acquired bike, I am able to bike along the Lansing River Trail, a developed walking, hiking and biking path created by the city of Lansing following along the banks of the Red Cedar. I can bike from where I live right by Old Town, through downtown, through REO town, the Potter Park Zoo, the Mt. Hope Cemetery, first South then East, to get to the Michigan State campus. From Lansing to East Lansing. On these trails and the roads these trails intersect, I have come to know this place and use them to travel between the places I learn, dream, dance, work, and make meaning on. All paved on Nkwejong.

I am on my way to a writing consultation. A brainstorming session with my colleague Kate on this very thesis, so I am reflective about my intentional moving through space and my relations on the bike ride I am taking. I look over to the sturgeon-missing river: a fact Dr. Elizabeth Lapensee discussed when we visited her class. In our classroom in Bessey Hall, also on the banks of the Red Cedar, we talked about plants as technologies, the responsibilities of the seeds we inherit, drank tea, and she talked to us about the missing Sturgeon, the keepers of water. We learned that the settlers poisoned the waters through unsustainable industrialization (paper mills and mining) and destabilized the Anishinaabe and neighboring tribes who shared place and populated the banks of the river. We invoked our relations, re-membered old ones, and made new ones. I was peddling back to Bessey Hall today too.

On this bike ride and for this thesis, I have been thinking about what to do with stories like this about settler colonialism not too far from the spaces we learn, think, and live on as members of settler colonial institutions, in this case, universities. I had been living and working in Bessey Hall at the banks of the Red Cedar for three semesters before I heard that story. This point isn't to admonish myself or invoke guilt, *just a stark reflection on how long it can take to learn stories, how little we can know about the places we live on/in and how stories come and go in, through, and between the relations you've practiced*. I didn't expect to learn about the Sturgeon that day, and it is one of the heaviest stories I still think about as I work on and ride along the Red Cedar and the land Nkwejong that I have come to know.

Stories about settler colonialism on the lands we live on, our relationality to these stories and what we do with them that is what I seek to interrogate in my time in academia, especially as I increasingly perform administrative roles and duties when working with local communities. So as a member of a university institution, sometimes representative, sometimes relative-person-in-charge, often naysayer, I wonder what to do with the stories of settler colonialism that I also must carry as I orient myself to the land I live on and work with the people that share this place too.

Thinking through my constellated position, as a grad student being trained, formalized, “disciplined” in many ways, part of that disciplining is a certain relationship to where I live and what I do. I now know that I live on Nkwejong and have to account for that. I know the land is marshland, which kinda explains a lot of things when you look around and walk around. I have to account for the people who work really hard to visibilize these histories. There’s a responsibility to think through in being a member of a *literal* settled institution on land that wasn’t really settled before. This relationship is forced. What are we doing with that forced relationship to the land? How are we being accountable? Making meaning? This storied practice of making relationships with the land gives me places to grow from and think from that aren’t really available if I’m approaching everything in the extractive way I was going about finding proof for gentrification and trying to satisfy some now-apparent colonial desire and rhetoric regarding solving a problem and finding the “*right way*” to live somewhere. Beyond theory, I am concerned with being responsible for the space I do *actually* take up where I live and the relationships and stories I become increasingly accountable for as I live somewhere.

Being formalized in a moment where there are also inherited legacies from Indigenous scholars and cultural rhetoricians asking our discipline to re-conceptualize our relationships to rhetoric, theory and story through approaches and practices that holds an understanding of a multiplicity of systems of knowledge and meaning-making, means I am being asked to be accountable in ways that maybe our formalized institutional and disciplinary ways of being cannot account for. I have been privileged and blessed to work in a place with mentors and methods that have allowed me to account for the stories in ways I didn’t expect to and ways that feel respectable to my community and our work, but this isn’t always a common story, and I hope that’s changed for you.



## Accountability

Indigenous scholars definitions of place and location become a helpful takeaway and articulation of responsibility as I wrap up. To begin to accept the accountability I am trying to articulate, I turn to Mishuana Goeman (2008) and her notion that, “Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning” (23). Invoking my practices of community building, the people and scholars who I read while I do it and the land, on which I’ve done this work is working towards an understanding from the perspective of the people and relations who give this place meaning. I have no way of knowing this holed up in the ivory tower, reading from a comfy chair. Goeman (2008) further elaborates, “Place is created in the process of remembering and telling stories and the ability for the receiver to understand the meanings of place encapsulated in language” (24). For me to get to know Nkwejong, I had to be out there, with people and place, communing, relating.

Invoking my relationships to this place is an act of localizing myself. In my search for and practice of building community, locating myself in this thesis “reveals a worldview and cultural orientation “and involves “establishing our connections to the land, Spirits, and ancestors” (Absolon 2011, 72). As Absolon (2011) further reminds us, “Location is central to establishing legitimacy and credibility as a researcher” (72). This is a claim I take to heart, especially considering the critique that Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012) present when they assess that often efforts to “decolonize” the academy or other spaces too-often abstract and extract from the land they are practicing on and do not invoke the sovereignty of the land and of the people who have stewarded the land. I consistently invoke the land(s) I work on to attempt to challenge this act of abstraction in my performance and not re-commit acts of settler-colonial

erasure because I also hear Mishuana Goeman (2008) asking “So how have we reached this stage of abstracting space in our academic inquiries? How have we moved away from the tangibility of place and stories that are embedded in generations of experience?” (31). To say it once more for performative emphasis – this work has been centered in Anishinaabewaki, more specifically in Nkwejong, and I am responsible for the space I take on the lands I work on. I make so much meaning in the relationships I have made with and on this land and I am grateful and thankful. Miigwetch Nkwejong.

So one thing I hope you take away, future grad student, is that place is not theoretical, although it is theorized. That if you seek to be invested in your community, you have to practice this investment and in this investment be aware of what stories and relations you are performing. This is what I’m learning is accountability; you’re going to have to define that for yourself.

Tim Dougherty (2016) makes an argument that an important storying practice in relating to the people around you in decolonial ways is interrogating “your own people’s story.” One practice to visibilize the ways coloniality affects your reality and/or your implicitness in the colonial project is tracing (y)our histories. Through my practice of building community, I have also come to believe that this must involve an interrogation of the places in which you currently reside as well. The space we take up in the places we inhabit become part of (y)our histories. In considering the stories I’ve come to know and the ways I come to know them in the relations I make, my academic trajectory now involves being accountable to these stories of place. The world-making power of stories and relationality means a lot of responsibility and working through these responsibilities then become the heart of my academic labor. One important aspect to note in the accountability of this performance is that Indigenous knowledges, stories, and ways of being inform so much of the thinking and performing of this piece. I do this to honor the

people who have taught me and also to honor the land I work on. I have tried my best to explain these knowledges/stories/worldviews from the perspective of how they've affected me and/or my storying and my practice. I have avoided over explaining Indigenous knowledges because some stories are not mine to explain or tell and some knowledges may only "make sense" in context not captured in this text. I make my choices in this regard listening closely to Kathleen Absolon (2011) and her warning that I should be cautious about what I include in my stories/performance as to not create a "super-highway to our traditional knowledge" (40).

The simplest definition of accountability that I want to put forward is: Accountability is carrying the stories you know and doing something about them. What this "something" may look like is navigated by where you are, who you are, and the expectations of the communities you share space with. Mukavetz (2016) also articulates a similar notion I am pulling from when I think about *carrying* stories, "As a graduate student, I found myself carrying their stories while in the institution and looking to these stories to answer my questions. For me, to carry stories means to consider how to be attentive to the materials we use to practice and make knowledge; that our knowledge lives in our bodies and is affected by what bodies experience; that sometimes, we have to wait for the knowledge—it will come to us when we are ready. To carry stories is a way to practice relational accountability" (4).

Figuring out *how* to be accountable is part of this labor and where this thesis leaves off, homie. It's not an answer I have, but a responsibility I've picked up and hope to share with you. In an earlier piece, Mukavetz (2014) also offers clarification, "Through an indigenous research paradigm, respect, reciprocity, and accountability are not just things to do to be ethical, but a way to cultivate and maintain the relationships we form with people, spaces, land, and the universe. Clearly, to enact relationality and relational accountability is personal and communal" (113). My

storied approach, reflections and which stories I chose to tell and who I chose to cite/invoke are the ways I am hoping I am accountable to the land I make meaning on and the community whose stories I co-tell. We both echo Shawn Wilson (2002) when he clarifies, “In essence [relational accountability] means that the methodology needs to be based in community context (be relational), and has to demonstrate respect, reciprocity, responsibility (be accountable as it is put into action)” (99). It is also nice to remember that, “It takes practice, time, and understanding. Sometimes, you’ll fuck it up. But, that’s okay. We all make mistakes. We are all learning – remembering” (Mukavetz 2016, 3). I hope this assuages any doubts you may have and helps you *do* and *be*.

In her calls for expansion of service-learning pedagogy, Terese Monberg offers a curriculum that considers the ways students write themselves into being in the communities they inhabit and dwell in, instead of framing it as the communities they “cross” into. She notes an important distinction as to how minoritized students often imagine these experiences and opportunities in community engagement, “Davi, Dunlap, and Green’s findings suggest that students of color approach service-learning as an opportunity not just to give back to a community, but also as an opportunity to rewrite their past and, by extension, the past/history of the community” (Monberg 2009, 30). My storying of this place is immersed in my storying of myself and naming this is part of being accountable. Because “the community landscape, its history, and the problems it confronts are always changing and require a continual attention to rewriting” (Monberg 2009, 36), the ways we pay attention to this rewriting/storying of place is centrally important in being respectful and thoughtful and accountable. You too, then, need to pay attention to the changing landscape and what it means to be respectful if you want to do this work.

My accountability to these stories doesn't stop at the end of this performance. My accountability persists and my relations continue growing and expanding through the work I do. This thesis is a hope for the practice of building community. It comes from a place of dreaming: dreaming for better care for the land we live on, for the people we live with, and how we share space. This thesis is a dream formed out of the practice of dreaming. By dreaming here, I mean the difficult imaginative work and process that involves sorting desires, stories of yourself and your world, and understandings of your environment: dreaming is one way we use the present and the past to propel ourselves into the future. And in this dream, this thesis imagines the practice of building community as a central aspect in this act of dreaming.

One way I continue being accountable is dreaming forward for the work this storied place and performance allows me to now do. Now that this thesis is said and done, now what? One dream that seems overt now is thinking about the ways certain labors are minoritized in the academy and if we're going to do the work of being "inclusive," how do we honor the story work of Indigenous peoples working through colonial stories and myths in the work they want to do? How do we un-minoritize this labor and honor the stories of indigeneity that may get told? Another dream that seems obvious now is that this work reflects my own wading through colonial erasure and my own re-membering of my Indigenous body and ancestors. Because of the way colonialism has affected my family specifically, my practice of re-membering is one of patience, listening and reflecting on what I know. My community work has been a conduit for this reflection and re-membering and this is something I will have to work through going forward. As my colleague Eric Rodriguez and I (2017) claim in our article "Problematizing Mestizaje," "we suggest that self-educating about local Indigenous histories and supporting local struggles for Indigenous sovereignty on the lands we currently call home and the universities

where we work is another necessary way to begin to work through the fog of colonial erasure” (233), I know we could only make this claim because of the work we’ve been doing in our communities and the ways it’s affected us. Like the other things I have written that I’ve cited throughout this thesis (the Inside Teaching origin story, the *Nuestros Cuentos* article, my PhD application letter story, and my reflections/poetry), I know they only exist because of my changed orientation. I know I am able to write about my scholarship and my stories the way I do because of this re-orientation I’ve storied here. It’s honestly been liberating and I’m grateful for having had the place to work alongside colleagues, friends, and mentors to do it. This thesis, then, also fits into a larger dream where we saturate “the academy” with our stories so that we can no longer be rendered invisible. These are some dreams I carry forward with me from this performance; you’re welcome to adopt them too if they help you.

Accountability for me as a scholar and a person living somewhere, then, is a lived process that involves paying attention, being receptive, and doing the mental labor of figuring out *how* to relate. The labor of being accountable comes in many forms and iterations and seeing your place in this labor is a responsibility I carry moving forward. The time that I have asked you to take to carry these stories is coming to an end with this performance, but that doesn’t mean we stop having to be accountable.

## **Conclusions, Farewells, Closing Scene**

Thank you for getting to this end of the performance with me. I appreciate your time and labor and, even if I may or may not know you, the relationship made between me, this performance, your act of reading and our carrying of stories is real and countable. Thank you.

I want to reiterate the moves I think I've storied here one last time:

- Be humble and figure out what that means for you as an academic
- Go out and do things: visit, commune, attend events (I promise it gets easier the more you do it)
- Pay attention and listen
- Play off your strengths and what you know
- Connect with pre-established things: you are the new one, not the community
- If you wanna make a new space, do it with others
- Learn what accountability means to you

Tending to this web of relations, for me, often meant helping put events “on,” organizing workshops, meeting people, and making do, in other words, actively working with others in creating spaces that bring people together. This doesn't come without hours committed to planning, making things “work” and/or staying on plan/schedule. The labors involved in tending to your relations can include: the oversight of event planning, meeting with people, making plans, changing plans, setting venues, scouting venues, meeting more people, thinking, finishing another concurrent event. Often it means setting up spaces, folding tables, setting out chairs, laying out space, setting up proper signage, planning for too many or too little attendance, checking sound, making sure bodies can navigate the spaces safely, and if a wheelchair is going to fit through what we've set up when/if we needed that to happen. It meant knowing the food

was ready, when it was coming, who was bringing it and have we met and offered for all our dietary options. When planning for workshops you had to make sure you have all the materials you could need and more, alongside navigating spaces not-necessarily-designed for the work you're trying to do, and wondering what you do if/when someone says something really racist, sexist, scary, and/or violent. It's knowing how to work with kids, how to speak respectfully to elders, how to listen, how to give and take, and what options you have if/when things become unsafe. There is no exhaustible list I can write to capture the moves, choices and rhetorical ways making events work, making do and practicing community happens. You'll know the specifics of that list and whether it's manageable, but I list a list I know here to remind you that this is all scholarly labor and it is through labor like this that I've been able to tell the stories I have. Cite this list if you have to if someone is resisting your work. Throw my thesis at them. But most importantly, remember it's valid and a dope way to do scholarship. For me, I can't have it any other way anymore.

Miigwetch again to Nkwejong and my relations. If I have represented you in a way that is disrespectful, I accept responsibility and the labor that comes with rectifying the disrespect.

It is my hope that my thesis performances and the stories it contains invoke the web of relations I have come to know on Nkwejong. I asked you at the beginning of the thesis to carry my stories with you as you read. It was my hope that this practice would help visibilize and re-perform the type of mental labor that carrying stories and being accountable to them can be. My process of coming to know Nkwejong and practice of building community has come through many navigations and relations and it is clear that there is no way I could ever fully represent that. I have performed a constructed web of storied relations to give us this moment to share what I have come to know. I hope this thesis offered you a storied place to feel and invoke and



honor my relations with me. I will say farewell with an invocation of accountability I've fashioned after one used by Thomas King (2003). Farewell, future colleague-homie, I wish you the best:

Take these stories. They're yours. Do with them what you will. Find them quaint and/or enlightening. Ignore them or take them to heart. Work past your guilt and/or embrace them completely. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now. Do something with them future homie; there is so much work to do.

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